

From Oligarchy to Republicanism: The Great Task of Reconstruction

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The main aim of Nabors' book corresponds directly to one of the greatest ambitions of any scholar of American history: that of defining the original meaning and nature of the American republicanism. Despite the number of contemporary scholars who have dwelled upon this subject over the 240 years of American federalism, the debate over the concept of American republicanism is yet ongoing. Nabors' view on this huge topic is as clear as it is resolute. He assumes that the idea of republicanism at the origins of the American system was based upon universal human rights as well as on universal political rights. In addition, Nabors strongly argues for the idea that the American republicanism cherished by the founding fathers corresponded to a truly democratic regime. It was precisely this kind of democratic republicanism on which the slaveowners' oligarchy of the South had infringed for half a century. Accordingly, he defines the Civil War as an 'interregime war', a clash between two different kinds of civilisation: one properly adherent to the native republican values of the American republic, the other totally at odds with them; one based upon a pure and true form of Republicanism (meaning a political democratic system), the other dominated by oligarchic and anti-democratic forms of government held by the southern aristocracies. This reference to the absence of political freedom relates not only to the institution of slavery, but also to its effect on free white men. Thus, according to the author, 'the slave power was epiphenomenal, evidence of something fundamentally different about the inner character of the slave South from which the slave power emanated, and scholarship has yet to lay a direct finger on its source, study it, and explain it' (p. 22). In particular, Nabors laments the scarce attention given by American scholarship to the impact effectively exercised by the southern 'oligarchy' – or 'aristocracy' – during the antebellum period on the civil society and political systems of the South. In his view, scholars have not often properly referred to the slaveowners' group as either an 'oligarchy' or an 'aristocracy'; and even if they used these terms, they 'underappreciated' the same definitions they used (p. 19). However, I think that this critique of the contemporary literature is too harsh, especially if one considers that the last few decades have witnessed a growing academic interest in the Southern slavery system and its impact in terms of political inequalities within the Southern States' civil society. In this particular respect, American scholarship generally agrees on defining both the slaveowner elites as a ruling class and the slavery system as a slaveocracy. This general acknowledgment is evident in all of the studies that have dealt, in part or completely, with the social conflicts which punctuated Southern

society during the antebellum period (from the works of Alison Goodyear Freehling and William Freehling to the studies of William Link or James Oakes, to name just a few of them). Maybe it is true that none of these studies has ever defined the Civil War as a ‘bloody interregime conflict’, but none of them has underestimated the deficiencies of the Southern States in term of democracy.

Given his interpretation of the Civil War as an ‘interregime conflict’, Nabors locates its most important achievement in the reestablishment of the original republican values of the American Revolution. These values, he asserts, were the true basis of the American government since the very beginning – and they were eventually corrupted by the southern oligarchies during the antebellum period. In this respect, in both the preface and the introduction, the author notes that the mainstream contemporary understanding of the Civil War underestimates the aforementioned achievement and he ascribes part of the responsibility of this general underestimation to American scholars, especially early 20th-century historians – though he seems also to point to the most recent literature.

As is well known, the post-Civil War republican project discussed by Nabors lasted for just a decade. Thus, in the last chapter, Nabors extends his previous reflections over the distinction between oligarchy and republicanism in the antebellum period and considers the reasons why the Republican reconstruction eventually failed and the traditional antebellum ruling elites got back political control of the South. After reviewing the main positions of contemporary scholarship on the subject, Nabors distances himself from scholarly interpretations which place the main responsibility for the aforementioned failure on the Republican side. According to him, in order to preserve the peace and — at the same time — to comply with the principles of democracy and liberty which characterised their idea of republicanism, the post-war Republican congressmen and the Republican presidents that followed could not have imposed their will for a long period over the South. Nabors finds the primary causal factor of the post-war Republican project’s failure to be the inequality and discrimination that emerged from Reconstruction in the southern oligarchy, whose main principles and practices were so deeply rooted in southern society than even the honorable republican effort to abolish slavery unleashed an unexpected conflict between poor whites and freedmen (see pp. 295–311). It was the rise of this racially-based hostility which allowed the southern economic élites — as to say the minority of southern people — to regain full control of the political machine.

I think this last interpretation of the Reconstruction period and, in particular, of the failed Republican attempt to introduce democratic values to the South, is extremely interesting and valuable. However, the author’s argument could have been more effective had it been detached from his previous fundamental argument over the concept of Republicanism – which forms the basis of his later assumptions relating to the Reconstruction period.

In fact I disagree with the logic behind the definition of American Republicanism espoused by the author. Nabors sees American Republicanism as a democratic political regime based upon human rights principles; a view which he derives from the published writings of the Republican Party’s representatives in the Civil War and Reconstruction periods. In this way, the definition of American republicanism amounts to a sort of truism, which is not discussed in relation to the academic literature, much of which contradicts it. In this respect it is enough to mention the never-ending debate over the compromise on slavery reflected in the Constitution of the United States, which has brought some scholars to term the early American political system either as a ‘Slaveholding Republic’ or as a ‘Slaveholders’ Union’.

Finally, even if we recognise ‘the profound regime difference’ between North and South (p. 23), and even if we can undoubtedly state that the Republicanism supported by Lincoln’s Republican Party prevailed at the end of the Civil War, this acknowledgement does not prove anything about the early meaning of American Republicanism which — in the mind of both late 18th-century constitutional framers, as well as a number of 19th-century scholars and politicians — could certainly coexist with various forms of elitist rule. An example of this view can be found in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who remarked that the origins of the civic tradition were republican and not democratic. Even more recently, S.M. Griffin has affirmed that the constitutional framers came from a hierarchical vision of politics and — even though they recognised the

new democratic tendencies unleashed by the American Revolution — they framed a Constitution which aimed at controlling the democratic process. In other words, the Federalists conceived politics as a sport reserved for players of a similar social background, endowed with the same education and the same financial means.⁽¹⁾ Finally, it should also be noted that in the late 18th-century United States, the word ‘republicanism’ was a controversial term, whose meaning could change according to both its usage and to the different ‘specific meanings that various factions sought to attach’ to it.⁽²⁾

As I have already mentioned, the author shows that the great task of the Republican Reconstruction was that of freeing the Federal system from any oligarchic form of government and rebuilding the American Republic after half a century of despotic domination by the Southern elites both at the federal and at the state level. In order to support his main point, Nabors relies on nothing less than the ‘speeches and writings of the Republicans who served in the Thirty-Eight, Thirty-Ninth, or Fortieth Congress from 1863 to 1869’ (p. 32). In particular, Nabors surveys 100 out of 299 members of the House of Representatives and Senate, affiliated with the Republican Party, who served during the Thirty-Eight, Thirty-Ninth, or Fortieth Congress, and analyses numerous Republican speeches in the House of Representatives and Senate. He enquires in particular as to ‘their general views about the nature of the American political regime and its division into two regimes, one identified as oligarchical or, alternatively, as aristocratic’, the other republican (p. 32). The congressional primary sources are mined for answers to subordinate questions as to the various distinctive characters of government (Who ruled? Who was ruled? How did they rule? What institutions supported the rulers? How did the regime develop? Who contested the regime?) and the answers are arranged by major topics, such as: inequalities of political participation; fiscal privileges; absence of any accessible primary education; censorship; and lack of freedom of expression. Each chapter is thus focused on a subject addressed by Republicans in Congress in order to prove the unquestionable difference between Northern and Southern states with respect to the idea of Republican values. Indeed, between 1861 and 1865, both in the House of Congress and Senate, the Republicans argued that all the distortions created by both the economic and social system of slavery were to be sought first of all in the undemocratic and despotic system of government promoted by the slave oligarchy, which was fundamentally incompatible with a society of free and equal citizens. The entire volume is therefore dedicated to highlighting the discrepancy between the oligarchic systems of the South and the ‘authentically’ republican and democratic systems of the Northern States, through the accusations coming from the Republican benches before and during the civil conflict and the tens of examples taken from congressional debates.

Even though, as I have stated before, I do not totally agree with Nabors’ general argument regarding the concept of American Republicanism, I nevertheless think that the methodological approach used by the author – letting the primary sources, i.e. the debates of Republicans in Congress, speak for themselves – is extremely valuable. It is indeed true that, most of the time, public and official documents, such as State and Federal legislature journals, are neglected in favor of archival sources, such as diaries or correspondence. The official institutional sources can reveal a great deal about an historical issue and Nabors uses the evidence masterfully. Where I would differ from the author is that I would not use the speeches of Republicans in Congress between 1861 and 1865 as evidence of the original meaning of American Republicanism, but would interpret these instead as showing a fundamental reconceptualisation of American Republicanism, occurring during and after the Civil War and marking the development of American civic and national identity ever since.

Notes

1. M. Griffin, *American Constitutionalism: From Theory to Politics* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), pp. 15-20. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. S.N. Sellers, *American Republicanism: Roman Ideology in the United States Constitution* (London, 1994). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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